

# Selling the Arc of Crisis: Promoting Foreign Policy Change during the Carter Presidency

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## Abstract

The Carter Administration came to Office seeking to continue a policy of détente. However, the Administration's policy vis-à-vis the Soviets became more assertive throughout the Presidency, culminating in the Carter Doctrine. The current paper applies a conceptual framework for "issue selling" to argue that a more assertive foreign policy was being promoted by the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and his NSC staff since the early days of the Carter Presidency. By applying an assortment of issue selling strategies, Zbigniew Brzezinski and the NSC staff were able to exploit the communicative interactions amongst the political leadership to continuously promote a more forceful US policy towards the Soviets. By being able to interpret and define the problem representation facing the Administration, the APNSA was able to initiate and continuously promote a wholesale policy transformation leading to the development of the Carter Doctrine.

**KEY WORDS:** Arc of Crisis; Carter Doctrine; communicative interaction; foreign policy change; issue selling

## INTRODUCTION

The Carter Administration arrived in Washington in the wake of several years of constructive engagement between the US and the USSR. Upon assuming the Presidency, Carter did not deviate from this line of reasoning and sought to maintain a policy of détente whilst devaluing the traditional East-West focus on international relations. In particular, he intended to adjust US military commitments to the available resources and downplay US-Soviet antagonism (Skidmore, 1996). For the Carter Administration, détente was understood as a combination of cooperation and competition. Since each superpower had expanding global interests, managing US-Soviet relations was crucial to avoid a devastating military conflict between the two superpowers.

In a letter to Brezhnev in January 1977, Carter assured the Soviets that "it is my goal to improve relations with the Soviet Union on the basis of reciprocity, mutual respect and benefit" (Brzezinski, 1983: 151-152). Carter identified several areas in which the US and the Soviets could cooperate to reduce the risk of nuclear proliferation: 1) conclusion of SALT; 2) comprehensive ban on nuclear tests; and 3) renewed effort to move forward on the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR). In addition, the President informed Brezhnev that he

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believed the Soviets could contribute to promoting a peaceful settlement in the Third World disputes, such as the Middle East and Southern Africa.

However, despite this initial objective, the Carter Administration's foreign policy underwent a profound reorientation, namely in favor of a more assertive and confrontational US stance towards the USSR (Auten, 2008; Njølstad, 1995; Rosati, 1991; Skidmore, 1996). The Administration's more assertive foreign policy was embodied in the Carter Doctrine which signaled a turn towards a more aggressive military posture regarding the Soviets. It overturned many of the Administration's prior foreign policy initiatives, such as nuclear non-proliferation, demilitarization of strategic regions, curtailment of conventional arms transfers to Third World countries, and the promotion of human rights. In their place there emerged a policy which emphasized a massive military build-up, increased military supply to Third World nations, and increased US global military presence (Garthoff, 1985).

Many researchers have identified several critical events as responsible for catalyzing the rise of the Carter Doctrine – for example, the fall of the Shah in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Another line of research has claimed that the Carter Administration's policy change resulted from the increasing control the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (APNSA), Zbigniew Brzezinski, and his National Security Council (NSC) staff came to exert over the foreign policy decision-making process. Gaddis Smith (1986) has synthesized this line of argumentation in no uncertain terms. This line of inquiry tends to emphasize that the APNSA's power grew as he increasingly assumed greater control over the interpretation of the interagency debates and denied alternative perspectives from reaching the President. Nevertheless, an adequate account of the mechanisms involved in this process has been lacking in the research on the Carter Presidency's foreign policy. While some studies have identified how Brzezinski was able to influence and manipulate the policy process in particular crisis situations (c.f., Garrison, 2002), they do not provide a comprehensive explanation of the how the APNSA contributed to promoting the change of the Carter Administration's policy vis-à-vis the USSR.

This paper proposes to overcome this shortcoming in the existing literature on the Carter Presidency and provide insight for political leadership regarding the role of advisors in successfully promoting policy issues. Accordingly, the paper argues that a more assertive foreign policy was being promoted by the APNSA and his NSC staff since the early days of the Carter Presidency. By managing the communicative interaction process within the Administration, Brzezinski and the NSC staff were increasingly able to promote a more assertive US policy towards the Soviets. Ultimately, they were able to sell a policy of

increased American confrontation with the Soviets by managing to define the strategic foreign policy and security issues facing the Administration. In particular, Brzezinski increasingly emphasized the development of an “arc of crisis” in Southwest Asia which could be exploited by the Soviets and create a serious threat to US security interests. By being able to interpret and define the problem representation facing the Administration, the APNSA was able to initiate and continuously promote a wholesale policy transformation leading to the development of the Carter Doctrine. In order to assess the mechanisms involved in catalyzing the change in foreign policy, this paper applies the conceptual framework for “issue selling” developed and applied by Dutton and associates (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 2001).

## **2 ISSUE SELLING: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Issue selling refers to the process by which an individual or group “affects others’ attention to and understanding of events, developments, and trends that have implications for organizational performance” (Dutton et al., 2001: 716). Issue selling is predominantly concerned with strategic issues, i.e., those developments or events which have the potential to influence an organization’s current or future strategy (Dutton & Duncan, 1987). The importance of strategic issues for international politics cannot be overstated. Diehl has long acknowledged that “an issue is what states choose to fight over” (Diehl, 1992: 333).

From this perspective, organizations, such as national governments, are marketplaces of ideas in which different actors struggle to promote their views and policies to those responsible for deciding on the organization’s strategic orientation (Dutton et al., 2001). While strategic decisions are, as a rule, made in the upper most echelons of a government, it has long been accepted that these decisions flow from activities carried out at different levels of the organization. Therefore, different political actors compete to attract the limited attention of the top policy-makers to the issues they consider to be strategically relevant and capable of affecting the governments’ current or future policies (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton & Duncan, 1987). In other words, political actors use an assortment of means and strategies to try to sell their interpretation of events and policy recommendations to try to shape the government’s course of action.

The concept of issue selling naturally implies that the strategic issues facing government decision-makers are socially constructed rather than passively perceived. Accordingly, it assumes a performative dimension in which individuals or groups are actively and deliberately involved in efforts to create strategic

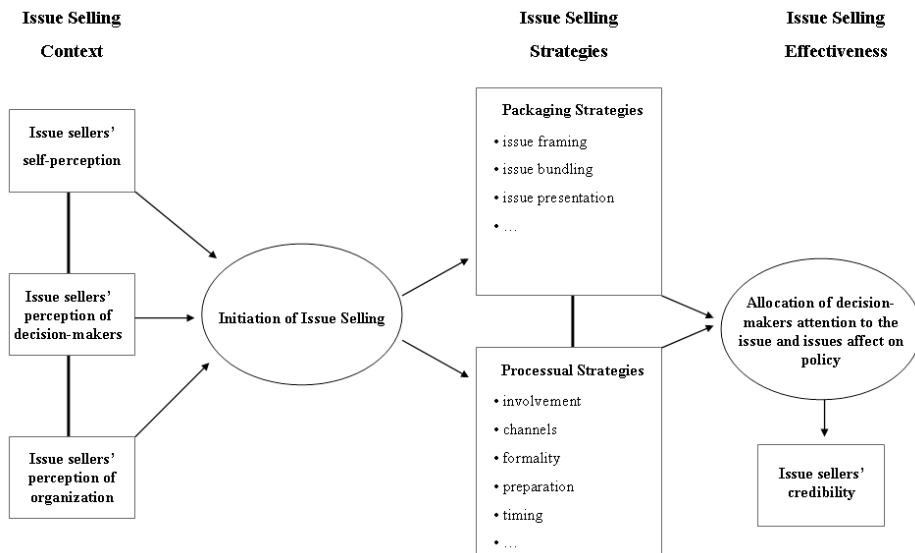
policy issues in a particular manner (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). The capacity to fashion the process of interpretation and construction of meaning should not be underestimated. As the research in the field of problem representations has acknowledged, the way that political situations are represented strongly constrains subsequent action because “the kinds of alternative solutions that are developed for a problem and the ways in which those solutions are evaluated and implemented depend on how the problem is diagnosed by group members” (Moreland & Levine, 1992: 21).

Issue selling is particularly important as mechanism for catalyzing policy change. By allocating decision-makers attention to altered or novel strategic opportunities and threats, issue selling has the capacity to mobilize a government’s resources to change its existing policy to try to capitalize on the opportunity or eliminate the danger (Dutton, 1986). Moreover, by intervening in the predecision policy process, issue selling can shape the course and pace of change by influencing the content of an organization’s strategic agenda (Dutton et al., 1997).

From this perspective, language and communication are at the heart of the issue selling process. Language is the means of communication which allows political actors not only to interpret and construct strategic issues, but also to reinterpret and reconstruct them (Marshak, 2002). As Kennedy and McComb (2010: 247) have stated, “communication is the mechanism that provides the information necessary to update and modify individual mental models”. It is through communication that individuals can create, change, and maintain their beliefs. It allows for more than the sheer transmission of information between individuals. Rather, it is the process by which groups and organizations come to create and recreate shared meanings and beliefs. While communication is not the only factor responsible for change, it is through the communicative process that other change variables are mediated (Lewis, 2011). Without communication new information is not considered and existing representations are not evaluated and checked against inconsistencies. Communication can add new information and refocus people’s attention to new situations and issues (Ford, 1999). Ultimately, communication reproduces the multiple linguistics tools that allow individuals and groups to construct reality (Semin, 2001). Accordingly, issue sellers use communication as their main instrument in attracting decision-maker’s attention to strategic issues and in attempting to promote a change in existing policy.

The issue selling framework is structured into three interrelated stages (Dutton & Ashford, 1993): the context for the initiation of the issue selling process, issue selling strategies, and issue selling effectiveness (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Issue Selling Framework**



Source: adapted from Dutton & Ashford (1993) and Ling et al. (2005)

## 2.1 Context for the Initiation of Issue Selling

Issue sellers begin with the basic choice of either choosing to initiate or not initiate a selling process. This choice is highly contingent on the individual or group's contextual sense-making (Dutton et al., 2002). In other words, before initiating an issue selling endeavor, sellers evaluate the importance of an issue and the possibility of successfully selling their interpretations and recommendations to top level decision-makers (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). There are several assumptions underlying this process. Sellers tend to assess their personal attributes and chances of successfully selling an issue to top level decision-makers (Ashford et al., 1997). In addition, sellers also attempt to interpret organizational cues, particularly regarding organizational culture, decision-maker's priorities and shared beliefs and values (Dutton et al., 2002).

To begin with, Dutton and Ashford (1993) claim that individuals are more encouraged to initiate issue selling when they expect their efforts to be successful or they are so convinced of the importance of an issue and personally committed to it that they believe it is worth the effort and the risk of failure. This assessment is influenced by several individual and organizational variables. For instance, an individual's role within a governmental organization can determine

his evaluation of the probability of succeeding in his efforts. The framework suggests that individuals are more willing to initiate issue selling when the issue is directly related to their functional area or their particular area of expertise. In addition, sellers' perceptions of their prestige and credibility amongst the decision-makers affect their willingness to promote an issue. The roles that sellers play in the policy-making process or the access and influence over the organization's communication network are particularly relevant in forging this appraisal. Moreover, sellers' perceptions of the risk inherent in their proposal also constrain their efforts to put forward an issue. Research has demonstrated that individuals are more likely to promote issues that are perceived to present less risk to themselves and their organization. In contrast, fear of the negative consequences for the seller resulting from failure of a selling enterprise may hinder any promotional initiatives (Kish-Gephart, 2009). Accordingly, Dutton and Ashford's (1993: 409) framework suggest the following proposition underlying the initiation of issue selling:

The initiation of issue selling is more likely when (a) sellers value and expect success at issue selling; (b) sellers are general managers; (c) sellers are advocating issues that match their functional orientation or source(s) of expertise; (d) sellers see themselves as credible in the eyes of top management; (e) sellers are located in central positions in the organization's or department's communication network, with few transaction alternatives and access to the communication network of the dominant coalition; (f) sellers perceive the issue to carry less impression-management risk; and (g) sellers perceive the issue to carry less performance risk for the organization (payoffs to the firm are expected to be positive).

Sellers' assessments of the beliefs and attitudes of the decision-makers also influence their disposition to initiate an issue selling process. The scholarly literature attests to the fact that when decision-making officials are perceived as being more supportive and open to such promotional initiatives, issue selling is more frequent. The theoretical assumptions underpinning the framework stipulate that decision-making groups which are deemed to possess differentiated belief structures induce greater issue selling initiatives. The basic reasoning is that pluralistic groups are more permeable and accommodating to new incoming information. This rationale is in line with Dutton and Ashford's (1993) argument that two-sided arguments supporting issue claims enhance the amount of attention

that decision-makers invest in a specific issue.

Moreover, organizational culture and perceived organizational values also influence sellers' dispositions to initiate an issue selling process. Organizations have socially shared mental models which provide a template for individuals to understand and deal with their organizational environment (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995). When sellers perceive that their issue is closely linked to the organization's values, the likelihood of initiating the selling process increases. This theoretical supposition has been reinforced by empirical evidence that demonstrates that for decision-makers to identify a specific issue it "would remain in the pool accumulating labels until it acquired one consistent with the organizational values" (Bansal, 2003: 520). The same is true when sellers combine the presentation of an issue with a proposed solution. Decision-makers are considered to be more open to take note of a seller's pitch if they believe that the issue is accompanied by the appropriate course of action for dealing with the problem. As Dutton and Ashford (1993: 410) hypothesize, "the initiation of issue selling is more frequent when an issue seller can identify a solution to attach to the issue".

In many cases, issue-sellers' perceived relationship with decision-makers can reinforce the disposition to initiate a selling process. More precisely, when the relationship is perceived as being based on friendship and trust, this creates an added sense of security which "strengthens potential sellers' belief that selling attempts will receive serious consideration, which in turn promotes an intention to sell" (Ying et al., 2005: 640).

## **2.2 Issue Selling Strategies**

Having decided to promote a particular strategic issue, political actors have an assortment of issue selling strategies they can employ. For the sake of conceptual clarity, I will classify them as packaging strategies and processual strategies. Recent research has demonstrated that issue selling strategies may change over time (Howard-Grenville, 2007). Therefore, the strategies presented are not static and individuals can apply different strategies in their selling initiatives over an extended period. Moreover, the following strategies are not exhaustive; rather they represent the extension and adjustment of Dutton and Ashford's initial conceptual framework to the domain of foreign policy.

### **2.2.1 Packaging Strategies**

Packaging strategies deal with how sellers choose to present the issue. In other words, it refers to "how an issue is linguistically framed, the way an issue is



presented, and how an issue's boundaries are established" (Dutton & Ashford, 1993: 410). Issue framing is a particularly valuable strategy for issue selling. In this case, issue sellers endeavor to present a particular conceptualization of an issue in order to make it more attractive to top level decision-makers (Chong & Druckman, 2007). In framing an issue, individuals have considerable discretion in choosing which substance and attributes of an issue they want to emphasize and which they prefer to downplay or disregard all together. Ultimately, framing implies organizing a set of facts, beliefs, and perceptions in ways that influence how decision-makers think about particular developments or events (Weiss, 1989).

As Dutton and Ashford (1993) have suggested, issues can be framed in a variety of forms: threat versus opportunity, internal versus external, urgent versus non-urgent, and certain versus uncertain. For instance, research has demonstrated that by framing an issue as urgent it is more likely to "breakdown decision-makers' threshold of resistance to feedback information" (Dutton & Duncan, 1987: 283). In addition, while there are some conflicting predictions about organizational responses to threats and opportunities (Chattopadhyay et al., 2001), there is strong indication that in framing issues as an opportunity decision-makers are more liable to suppress psychological obstacles to different assessments and information, such as cognitive dissonance mechanisms (Dutton, 1993). Moreover, the more issues are framed as being controllable or having a solution, the greater the probability that top level decision-makers will be attracted (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton & Duncan, 1987).

The way in which strategic issues are framed also influences the decision-making process by attributing responsibility. For example, depicting an issue as defense-related or as a diplomatic issue assigns responsibility to different departments and agencies in a government for dealing with the issue. Likewise, framing an event as a crisis situation may limit access to the policy-making process since in crisis situations there is a tendency to centralize the decision-making process in the upper echelons of government body (Driskell & Salas, 1991). As a result, selling an issue as a crisis could seriously limit bureaucratic involvement in the policy-making process.

The capability to frame an issue succinctly is also regarded as a key factor in securing the attention of top level decision-makers (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). It is essential that an issue is easily simply structured and easy to understand. Issues which are framed in a concise and straightforward manner require that decision-makers exhaust fewer efforts for initial comprehension and in subsequent updating.

Another important packaging strategy is to bundle issues. Issue bundling



involves presenting an issue with other issues. The underlying rationale is to portray an issue as related and interconnected with the other issues and thus emphasize its importance. Dutton and Ashford (1993) argue that presenting an issue which is interconnected to other important issues affects decision-makers' willingness to invest their resources on the issue. It also has the advantage of potentially involving a larger number of decision-makers since it is associated with other issues with which the government may be considering or managing.

The way an issue is presented is equally important in obtaining decision-makers attention and consideration. A presentation strategy may rely on providing supporting evidence or facts to try to offer greater legitimacy to its claim. Research in corporate organizations has confirmed the importance of "using numbers and charts, conveying a logical and coherent structure, and emphasizing bottom-line impacts" to successfully promote issues (Dutton et al., 2001: 721). Another presentation strategy involves the continuous presentation of issues over an extended period of time (Dutton et al., 2001). This strategy relies on a seller's persistence to try to prepare and create a predisposition in decision-makers to accept the sellers' pitch. Closely related to the previous strategy is the incremental presentation of an issue. Issue sellers may decide that it is more useful and rewarding to promote an issue by breaking it down into smaller components. This is in line with Weick's (1984: 48) claim that due to the overwhelming character of many strategic issues, "changing the scale of a problem can change the quality of resources that are directed at it".

As section 3 will demonstrate, the APNSA employed multiple packaging strategies to promote a change in the Carter Administration's foreign policy. Brzezinski and his NSC staff worked diligently to frame a deteriorating international security environment, bundling threats and using various presentation strategies to convince the President to adopt a more assertive policy towards the Soviet Union.

### **2.2.2 Processual Strategies**

Issue selling depends as much on the how an individual chooses to sell an issue as it does on his packaging strategy. There are several process options presented in Dutton and Ashford's framework. The initial process is related to a political actor's choice to sell an issue individually or involve others in helping him promote his agenda. Many times, by employing a bundling strategy a seller may associate his issue with other individuals or groups issues and try to harness their involvement in promoting the sell. Using a coalition to sell an issue provides the seller with additional resources for calling attention to his issue. While managing

to get more individuals involved in promoting an issue certainly increases the probability that top decision-makers will focus on the subject, it also may have some drawbacks for the seller (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). To begin with, if a seller is seeking self-promotion, the inclusion of additional political actors may dilute his influence in the process as well as limit the credit for selling the issue. In contrast, if the issue is not appreciated by the decision-makers, the involvement of others allows the seller to attenuate his role and responsibility in the selling process.

Another processual strategy is to use the most appropriate channels for selling an issue. A political actor may choose to use official channels such as formal meetings and hearings or other formal means of communication such as official studies and reports. However, a seller may prefer to use more private and informal approaches to communicate with the top decision-makers. For instance, a seller may privilege one-one-one meetings with the top level decision-makers or more private communication channels such as personal memos or letters. Also, informal behind-the-scenes negotiations and communications may be another approach to try to sell an issue to decision-makers. Regardless of the strategy adopted by the seller, there are always trade-offs that must be considered. According to Dutton and Ashford (1993), the use of formal and public channels increases the likelihood that top decision-makers will invest greater attention to an issue since an audience may place an impression-management burden on decision-makers compelling them to address the issue. However, top level decision-makers may object to more public initiatives and try to discredit the seller's legitimacy and, ultimately, the effort may tarnish his credibility for future selling endeavors. The level of formality a seller adopts in his strategy depends considerably on the prevailing organizational culture. Organizations which promote more unofficial channels and interactions are more appropriate to informal selling efforts, whereas formal organizational cultures tend to rebuff such initiatives. In other words, "the more a seller tailors the formality of his or her selling attempt to match prevailing organizational norms, the greater the level of top management's attention invested in an issue" (Dutton & Ashford, 1993: 420).

Besides the original processual strategies presented by Dutton and Ashford (1993), Dutton et al. (2001) have identified several other strategies sellers exploit to try to promote their issues. One such strategy is adequately preparing the sell through a range of activities which allows the seller to gain greater knowledge and control of the issue being promoted. Preparation entails a proactive attitude in which sellers actively seek to set the stage for selling an issue by taking measures beforehand which will enhance their capabilities to successfully obtain decision-

makers attention and approval. Research has confirmed that preparatory activities which identify and involve important decision-makers and link issues to answers valued by the organization tend to be positively related to issue-selling success (Bishop et al., 2011).

In addition, the timing involved in the selling of an issue is also an important factor that sellers have to take into consideration (Dutton et al., 2001). Timing strategies are involved in defining the persistence, opportunism, and involvement of others in the selling process. In particular, research has emphasized the importance of capitalizing on “windows of opportunity” created by focusing events (Birkland, 2004; Mintrom & Norman, 2009). These events provide sellers with an extraordinary occasion to sell an issue since decision-makers are normally highly responsive to environmental changes.

Processual strategies were particularly significant in promoting a wholesale change in the Carter Administration’s foreign Policy. Section 3 illustrates the critical importance of supervising the decision-making process, particularly controlling the communication and interaction channels to the President. By effectively employing numerous processual strategies, the APNSA was successful in selling his policy options to the President and re-orienting US foreign policy

### **2.3 Issue Selling Effectiveness**

The success of the issue selling strategies employed by sellers may be evaluated by the amount of time and attention that an issue receives from top level decision-makers and the resulting status of the seller’s credibility after the selling effort (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). In the first case, the allocation of the top level decision-makers’ attention is essential for initiating communication for change (Ford & Ford, 1995). Before decision-makers can discuss possible situations and options for action, decision-maker’s attention must first be directed towards a particular issue. In other words, top level decision-maker’s “allocation of attention to an issue is a necessary precursor to their taking substantive action on an issue” (Dutton & Ashford, 1993: 404). Once an issue has seized the decision-maker’s attention, the communication for understanding stage can begin. In this phase, decision-makers assess the need for transforming the situation and they initiate an interaction process in order to define the problem representation (Ford & Ford, 1995). This interaction process enables the decision-making body as a whole to gradually recreate shared meaning and develop a common cognitive process (Kennedy & McComb, 2010). As decision-makers communicate with each other they can share their representations and beliefs, contributing to a better assessment of the situation and to the convergence of the group’s mental models.

Subsequently, after a shared problem representation is established, decision-makers can proceed to the communication for performance stage in which they work out the best course of action to adopt (Ford & Ford, 1995). In this process they can create a shared understanding of the objectives and strategy that best satisfy their organizational needs. The definitive evaluation of the effectiveness of an issue selling effort is its capacity to contribute to an alteration of the existing organizational policy regarding the specific issue in question.

The second indicator of the effectiveness of the issue selling endeavor is related to the status of the seller's credibility after the selling effort. The success or failure of a selling effort and the outcome of the sell affects a seller's standing in future selling initiatives. If the issue sold produces positive organizational results and the seller is acknowledged for his role in promoting the issue than his ability to entice decision-makers in the future will certainly increase. Moreover, greater credibility will contribute to a seller's inclination to initiate further issue selling efforts. According to Dutton et al. (1997: 410), "with greater credibility, middle managers may see issue selling as less risky to their organizational image in the eyes of top management". In contrast, unsuccessful initiatives or issues that produced negative organizational outcomes may discredit a seller's reputation and stigmatize him in future selling initiatives.

### **3 SELLING THE ARC OF CRISIS**

Jimmy Carter arrived in the White House with limited knowledge of international affairs. His choices for foreign policy advisors reflected his need for an experienced group of foreign policy professionals. For that reason, Carter chose Walter Mondale for Vice President. A seasoned Senator, Mondale was chosen for his political familiarity with the federal government, particularly the legislative branch. In contrast to the past, Carter wanted an involved and active Vice President, i.e., "a second in command" (Carter, 1982: 39). As a result, Mondale received all the security briefings sent to Carter, was invited to participate in all the President's official meetings, and assumed an active role in planning domestic, diplomatic, and security strategy.

For Secretary of State, Carter selected Cyrus Vance, a New York lawyer with extensive policy-making experience in Washington. Vance had served as a Department of Defense counsel under Kennedy and Secretary of the Army and Deputy Defense Secretary under Johnson. Vance also had a vast experience in negotiating international issues, such as the Bay of Pigs prisoner release with Cuba, as mediator in the Turkey-Cyprus conflict, as negotiator in the USS

Pueblo crisis with North Korea and at the Paris Peace Conference on Vietnam (Glad, 2009). Vance sought to re-institutionalize foreign policy development and implementation back into the State Department. Breaking with the Kissinger system, Vance required that foreign policy have consistency which could only be established through a proper departmental institution: "The United States needs a firm, consistent foreign policy, understood and supported by its professionals, if we are to bridge the gap that exists between the formulators of policy at the political level and the professional executors of that policy in the Foreign Service" (Vance, 1983: 40). Carter and Vance developed a great personal friendship throughout the years (Carter, 1982), making Vance one of Carter's premier foreign policy advisors.

Harold Brown was Carter's nomination for heading the Department of Defense. The nuclear scientist that headed the California Institute of Technology had acquired considerable experience with defense-related issues during his tenure as director on weapons research at the Pentagon and as Secretary of the Air Force (Glad, 2009). Carter wanted someone who would discipline the Pentagon, namely by re-establishing priorities and introducing an efficient management model, while getting rid of unnecessary and redundant defense expenditures. In his view, the Pentagon needed "both a scientist with a thorough knowledge of the most advanced technology and a competent business manager, strong-willed enough to prevail in the internecine struggles among the different military services" (Carter, 1982: 55). As a result of the preference for this particular profile, in the initial years of the Carter Presidency, Brown served essentially as a manager, rather than a general political advisor (Moen, 1990).

The fourth principal advisor on foreign policy appointed by Carter was Columbia University Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski. Brzezinski and Carter met through the Trilateral Commission and, beginning in early-1975, Brzezinski was to regularly send Carter documents on foreign policy issues (Brzezinski, 1983; Vaughan, 2009). Carter chose Brzezinski to take up the role of APNSA knowing it was a controversial nomination (Carter, 1982). For the first time in history the APNSA was given Cabinet status. Brzezinski had direct access to Carter and consulted personally with him several times a day. Whilst acknowledging his proclivity for contentious and provocative positions, Carter selected Brzezinski knowing he would not be deferential to the Secretary of State, therefore allowing for the airing of multiple perspectives and options. According to Carter, Brzezinski and Vance complemented each other. Brzezinski was innovative and bold in his proposals, while Vance was vigilant and meticulous. Both men and their organizations embodied two contrasting, but complementary approaches to foreign policy-making. True to his desire to implement a collegial model of

decision-making, Carter appreciated and encouraged competition between his senior advisors in order to stimulate the discussion of multiple points of view. In order to promote comprehensive and balanced analyses, Carter created a host of formal and informal decision-making structures (e.g., the Policy Review Committee, the Special Coordination Committee, the Friday foreign-affairs breakfast, and the weekly Vance, Brown, and Brzezinski [V-B-B] luncheon).

However, since the early days in the Presidency, Brzezinski began alerting Carter and the principals to the growing Soviet threat and the need for a more assertive US policy. The APNSA took advantage of his contextual knowledge and employed several strategies to successfully sell the Arc of Crisis theory to the President and as a result contribute decisively to the advent of the Carter Doctrine. In the following pages I will apply the issue selling framework presented above to analyze how Brzezinski brought the issue to the attention of the decision-makers and induce a wholesale transformation of the Administration's foreign and security policy.

### **3.1 The APNSA in the Carter Administration's Foreign Policy Decision-Making Structure**

Traditionally, the role of the APNSA has been understood as an honest broker that makes sure that the President has access to all the relevant views necessary for him to make a decision. This does not imply that the APNSA must be a neutral broker. Over the last half century, policy advocacy has become a regular trait of the individuals occupying the role of the APNSA (Burke, 2005). Ultimately, the APNSA must be able to balance his role of policy advocate with that of a custodian of others views. Therefore, as Daalder and Destler (2009) argue, the APNSA must be a trustful member of the President's decision-making team. Not only must the President trust the APNSA to present him with the best and unbiased advice, but the other senior foreign policy officials must also trust him to present their views to the President fairly and openly and maintain them involved in the decision-making process.

In this sense, Brzezinski was an early advocate of the need to compel the Soviets to restrain their international behavior, particularly in the Third World. For the Carter Administration, détente was understood as a combination of cooperation and competition. While recognizing the limitations of its application, Carter sought to implement a policy that simultaneously tried to harmonize competition and collaboration. Since each superpower had expanding global interests, managing US-Soviet relations was crucial to avoid a devastating military conflict between the two states. Vance (1983) believed it was possible

to regulate the rivalry even though he acknowledged that competition was and would continue to be the primary trait of the relationship. While Brzezinski (1983) also considered the promotion of détente desirable, he continually emphasized the need for greater reciprocity from the USSR. Moreover, whereas Vance believed that détente could lead to greater US-Soviet accommodation, Brzezinski (Idem) viewed it essentially as an opportunity to curb the impetus of the Soviet military build-up. Brzezinski had been active in promoting his view of détente to Carter since the Presidential campaign. In early 1976 Brzezinski submitted a memo to Carter summarizing his understanding of the US-USSR relationship. In it he emphasized the need for the US to make it “unmistakably clear to the Soviet Union that détente requires responsible behavior from them on fundamental issues of global order and it is incompatible with irresponsible behavior in Angola, the Middle East, and the UN” (Brzezinski, 1983: 150). The evaluation of the situation laid out in the memo would guide Brzezinski’s political outlook throughout the following years.

Brzezinski’s role as an energetic advocate was sponsored by Carter’s objective of implementing a collegial decision-making system (Carter, 1982). More precisely, Carter wanted to have a pluralistic and open decision-making system which could benefit from multiple perspectives and options. Therefore, he selected Brzezinski knowing he would not be deferential to the Secretary of State. According to Carter, Brzezinski and Vance complemented each other, since both men and their organizations embodied two contrasting, but complementary approaches to foreign policy-making. Brzezinski was innovative and bold in his proposals, while Vance was vigilant and meticulous. Accordingly, Carter encouraged Brzezinski:

Zbigniew Brzezinski and his relatively small group of experts were not handicapped by the inertia of a tenured bureaucracy or the responsibility for implementing policies after they were evolved. They were particularly adept at incisive analyses of strategic concepts, and were prolific in the production of new ideas, which they were always eager to present to me. I encouraged them to be unrestrained in their proposals, and consequently had to reject a lot of them. (Carter, 1982: 53)

Ultimately, the power to influence the President came from who had the most access to Carter. As research has demonstrated, regular, direct access to the President is particularly important in determining the amount of influence advisors possess (Link, 2000). Brzezinski was quite aware that his power came from his relationship with the President. As he notes in his memoir, much of



Brzezinski's influence derived from the degree to which he was perceived as being close to the President. Therefore, Brzezinski (1983: 64) sought to maintain as much direct access to the President as possible, knowing full well that "only then could I assert my own authority in a manner consistent with his views". For that reason, Brzezinski was always in close contact with Carter and was normally at his side when major foreign policy issues were discussed.

### **3.1.1 Packaging the Imminent Threat of Soviet Conquest**

Brzezinski and his NSC staff employed a host of issue selling strategies to try to influence the Administration's foreign policy decision-makers understanding of Soviet international behavior and its implications for US global interests. Since the early months of the Carter Presidency the APNSA framed Soviet involvement in international affairs as a threat to US security. In particular, Brzezinski persistently emphasized the danger of the Soviet exploitation of local turmoil to expand its influence and control over Third World countries. For instance, Brzezinski (1983: 54) pressed Carter for a comprehensive Middle East settlement "without which the further radicalization of the Arab world and the re-entry of the Soviet Union into the Middle East could not be avoided". When war erupted in the Horn of Africa, Brzezinski again pushed the issue of growing Soviet assertiveness on the President. Besides the threat to US security in the Middle East, Brzezinski also exploited domestic politics to sell his view. In a Weekly Report to the President in late-1977, he cautioned Carter that due to the Administration's current policy "we are confronting a growing domestic problem involving public perception of the general character of that policy", which was ultimately "seen as 'soft'" (Brzezinski to Carter, 18 November, 1977).

The Iranian Revolution provided Brzezinski and his NSC staff with an additional opportunity to press his view. In particular, the potential fall of the Pahlavi regime allowed the APNSA to highlight the urgency in re-evaluating US foreign policy. In his late-1978 Weekly Report, Brzezinski alerted Carter of the imminent threat of a major political destabilization of a large part of the Third World:

If you draw an arc on the globe, stretching from Chittagong (Bangladesh) through Islamabad to Aden, you will be pointing to the area of currently our greatest vulnerability. All at once, difficulties are surfacing in Iran and Pakistan, and they are thinly below the surface in India and are very manifest in Bangladesh, and there is reason to believe that the political structure of Saudi Arabia is beginning to creak. Turkey is also becoming

wobbly. (...) There is no question in my mind that we are confronting the beginning of a major crisis, in some ways similar to the one in Europe in the late 40's. Fragile social and political structures in a region of vital importance to us are threatened with fragmentation. The resulting political vacuum might well be filled by elements more sympathetic to the Soviet Union. (Brzezinski to Carter, 02 December, 1978)

As regional turmoil increased and new international crises surfaced in the final years of the Carter Presidency, Brzezinski would augment his appeals for a policy re-evaluation emphasizing the imminent threat to US security and interests. Moreover, the APNSA consistently framed the issue regarding the Soviet threat in the wider context of American global security, rather than as a local and isolated issue. As a result, any Soviet activity in the Third World could have potentially devastating consequences for US security. For example, in Brzezinski's view, Soviet and Cuban support for the Front for the National Liberation of the Congo (FNLK) fighting in Zaire's Shaba province could catalyze revolutionary fervor throughout the entire African continent and ultimately destabilize the Persian Gulf region (Brzezinski to Carter, 11 March, 1977).

The APNSA also bundled his call for more assertive foreign policy with other strategic issues in discussion. In particular, Brzezinski and his NSC staff associated the Soviet threat to US energy concerns. Aware of President Carter's concern with America's energy vulnerability, the APNSA obstinately corroborated the conclusions of PRM-10 that claimed the need to safeguard access to the Middle East's natural resources created the potential need for American intervention, particularly against Soviet encroachment (Brzezinski, 1983; Brzezinski to Carter, 03 March, 1979). Brzezinski also endeavored to link US-USSR bilateral issues, such as the Indian Ocean talks, science and technology transfers, Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, and the rapprochement with China, to Soviet behavior in the Third World.

Brzezinski also applied several presentation strategies. Besides the daily report to the President, Brzezinski developed a weekly NSC report in which he would provide more comprehensive reflections and considerations on the most important foreign policy issues. The NSC weekly reports allowed Brzezinski to freely present his assessments on the major challenges confronting the Administration as well as evaluating its performance. Brzezinski's reports and memoranda for the President differed from many of the documents sent by his colleagues. Many advisors, such as Vance and Brown, also interacted repeatedly with the President. However, their documents contained much fewer recommendations than those from Brzezinski, whose texts were usually replete

with advice and suggestions on how to proceed and which policy to implement (Glad, 2009).

Moreover, the APNSA used official sources to endorse his selling presentations. For instance, he exploited the Defense Department's assessments of US global strategy to try to convince the Administration to adopt a more assertive policy vis-à-vis the USSR. The interagency debate on Military Force Posture Review report presented in mid-1977 (PRC 08 July, 1977; PRM-10) provided Brzezinski with an opportunity to propose the creation of a rapid deployment force which the US could utilize to quell local conflicts and prevent potential Soviet expansion in the Third World, particularly the Middle East. During the discussions Brzezinski emphasized the growing momentum of the Soviet military and the vulnerability of the Persian Gulf region. He argued that the increased capability of the Soviets to project power into the Third World threatened US interests in these regions and required a more robust response. In a similar fashion, in 1979, the APNSA used the NSC's Comprehensive Net Assessment-1978 to bolster his claims (Comprehensive Net Assessment, 1978). The study's assessment of Soviet capabilities and US losses in the Middle East allowed Brzezinski to propose the development of a broad consultative security framework for the Middle East which would require greater US leadership and a significant increase in American economic and military assistance to the region, as well as an increase in the US military presence in the area (Brzezinski to Carter, 03 March, 1979).

Brzezinski also tried to capitalize on allies' initiatives. Several US allies cautioned the Administration that the USSR was increasingly asserting its influence in the Third World. For instance, the Sudanese President personally wrote Carter warning that the Soviets were "pursuing a sinister grand strategy in Africa" and hoped that the US "would respond favorably to requests of help from those countries ready and eager to defend themselves against the Soviet threat" (Brzezinski, 1983: 179). Likewise, the Shah also subscribed to the thesis of a "Soviet grand design" for the Third World (Vance, 1983: 322). In his first meeting with Carter, the Shah was particularly emphatic in stressing that the Soviets, due to prospective energy shortages, might try to control the Middle East's oil resources. Accordingly, the APNSA would use these claims and endorsements to try to buttress the issue in favor of a more assertive policy towards the Soviets.

### **3.1.2 Managing the Information and Decision-Making Process**

Brzezinski was equally proficient in using the formal and informal advisory systems and processes to sell issues he considered to be strategic. In fact,

Brzezinski was co-responsible for developing the organizational model of the NSC. As the principal forum for international security issues requiring Presidential consideration, Brzezinski designed a very simple NSC structure in which the APNSA would play a central role in policy decision-making. The Carter Administration's NSC had only two standing committees: the Policy Review Committee (PRC) and the Special Coordination Committee (SCC) (Presidential Directive 2, 20 January, 1977).

The PRC was established to deal with department-specific issues which had repercussions for other departments or agencies. The PRC was chaired in accordance to the subject under consideration, as was the attendance of non-statutory members. The SCC, for its part, dealt with "cross-cutting issues requiring coordination in the development of options and the implementation of Presidential Decision" (Presidential Directive 2, 20 January, 1977). In order to coordinate the inter-organizational decision-making process, the APNSA was appointed as the Chairman of the SCC. The PRC/SCC system allowed Cabinet heads to engage Carter directly on issues of foreign policy and national security, but maintained coordination of the NSC centralized in the Presidency, namely through Brzezinski's role. In fact, the APNSA was designated to manage the normal functioning of the NSC, namely by determining the agenda and guaranteeing that the necessary documentation was prepared and made available to the council (Brzezinski, 1983: 60).

What's more, Brzezinski controlled many of the key policy-making documents and managed the access of information to the President. Carter had established the Presidential Review Memorandums (PRM) and Presidential Directives (PD) as the main working instruments of the NSC. The PRM were used to direct the different departments and agencies to carry out policy reviews and analyses, namely by identifying the issues to be considered by the NSC, defining the problem, setting a deadline for the analysis, and assigning responsibility for it to one of the NSC committees. The studies carried out by the different departments and agencies would serve as the basis for the memorandum which supported a PD, that is "a series used to promulgate Presidential decisions on national security matters" (Presidential Directive 1).

Over time, Brzezinski developed into a "gate-keeper" by controlling many of the documents directed to the President. Shortly after the NSC formal structure was approved, Brzezinski obtained the President's approval for preparing the PRMs that directed the NSC to study certain issues and recording PRC and SCC views and recommendations. Recommendations reached at these meetings would serve as the basis for a PD that the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs would author and submit to the President for approval. However,

when a conclusion on a particular issue was not reached, the APNSA was also responsible for writing the summary report and delivering it to the President. In each instance, none of these documents were required to be previously submitted to the PRC or SCC for review. The power to write and deliver the documentation directly to the President gave Brzezinski the power to mediate the interaction process and frame the policy recommendations discussed.

In addition, Brzezinski also exploited the numerous informal channels available to him to sell his foreign policy view. Carter increasingly came to rely on an informal advisory structure and processes (Newmann, 2004). As the President and his top advisors became dissatisfied with the formal interagency process, informal interactions and processes became dominant in defining policy. Two informal structures were particularly important: the Friday foreign-affairs breakfast and the weekly Vance, Brown, and Brzezinski (V-B-B) luncheon. These informal meetings were endorsed by Carter and allowed for discussing and resolving many foreign policy issues without the hindrance of the Cabinet or bureaucratic apparatus.

The Presidential breakfasts grew into important executive sessions of close, intimate, and confidential discussions, which provided many of the key-decision-makers an opportunity to interact directly with the President. Although the Presidential breakfasts were informal and Carter resisted having any official agenda, Brzezinski was able to influence the issues discussed by indirectly suggesting them during his formal morning briefing and in early-1980 Carter authorized the APNSA to write-up a summary of the meetings conclusions (Brzezinski, 1983).

Equally important were the V-B-B luncheons where the participants were able to freely exchange perspectives on topics of foreign policy and national security. The luncheons allowed for the top three foreign and security policy advisors to resolve issues in which they felt did not need to involve a formal PRC or SCC. The intimate nature of the luncheons allowed for the decision-makers to have greater negotiation flexibility and political leeway. For instance, Brzezinski (1983: 70) acknowledged that as time went by and he and Brown were increasingly in sync on policy issues “the absence of staff made it easier for Vance to accommodate without loss of face”. In the manner of the Presidential breakfast, the V-B-B luncheons would also result in a memorandum drafted by Brzezinski which was sent to the President and participants highlighting the decisions reached.

Brzezinski also used public channels to promote his issues. For example, during the Ogaden War and the Shaba conflict, Brzezinski publicly chastised the Soviets for their growing involvement in African politics. When the situation

in the Shaba province erupted once again in May 1978, Brzezinski appeared on the NBC program *Meet the Press* and claimed that renewed confrontation “could not have taken place without the invading parties having been armed and trained by the Cubans and, indeed, perhaps also the East Germans, and we have sufficient evidence to be quite confident in our conclusion that Cuba shares the political and the moral responsibility for the invasion” (Department of State, 1978: 26). More notably, notwithstanding the recommendation resulting from the interagency debate against binding wider US-USSR relations to the Soviets’ actions in the Horn of Africa, the APNSA implicitly ended up linking them in a breakfast with reporters hosted by Vice-President Mondale in early- March 1978. Brzezinski stated specifically that the “unwarranted intrusion of Soviet power into a purely local conflict... will inevitably complicate the context not only of the (SALT) negotiating process itself but of any ratification that would follow the successful conclusion of the negotiations” (Murphy, 1978: 4).

### **3.1.3 The Emergent Sell**

Since the early days of the Carter Presidency, Brzezinski and his NSC staff favored a more assertive US policy towards the Soviets because they believed it was an essential factor in upholding *détente*. As Brzezinski (1983: 186) made clear to Carter in a memo in early-March 1978:

The Soviets must be made to realize that *detente*, to be enduring, has to be both comprehensive and reciprocal. If the Soviets are allowed to feel that they can use military force in one part of the world – and yet maintain cooperative relations in other areas – then they have no incentive to exercise any restraint.

The APNSA employed a wide array of issue selling strategies to put forward his view and convince decision-makers of its accuracy and benefits for American global standing. He framed the issue as a strategic threat to US security and global interests which required and urgent response. Failure to act and assume a more assertive policy towards Soviet involvement in the Third World could jeopardize American global leadership and even Carter’s domestic standing. Ultimately, it could undermine other issues of US interest such as the West’s energy security. Brzezinski regularly pitched his views directly to the President through simple and policy-oriented recommendations which he would buttress with official estimates and evaluations of Soviet capabilities and intentions.

However, despite Brzezinski’s many attempts to sell his view to the

Administration's top level decision-makers, the APNSA was many times countered by other foreign policy officials. In particular, Vance rejected the idea that Soviet actions in the Third World were part of any grand design. On the contrary, Vance viewed Soviet behavior simply as the exploitation of emerging opportunities. In addition, his close personal relationship to Carter also allowed him to impress his policy views and recommendations on the President. Equally important, Brown was also initially inclined to avoid antagonizing the Soviets (c.f. Policy Review Committee Meeting, 1977; Special Coordinating Committee, 20 January, 1978; Special Coordinating Committee, 02 March, 1978).

Ultimately, as international crises acquired an overwhelming importance over time, the top level decision-makers, particularly the President, were increasingly considerate and attuned to the APNSA's analysis of the situation. It was especially Brzezinski's processual strategies that allowed him to sell his issues. In joining the Administration, Vance (1983) had requested that two conditions be accepted by Carter: 1) that he was to become the President's spokesman on foreign policy; and 2) that he must be able to present his own unfiltered views on foreign policy issues before any decision was made. Throughout the early years, Vance jockeyed with Brzezinski for influence in the decision-making process as each one tried to stamp their respective perspectives on US foreign policy. However, the APNSA's capacity to manage the formal and informal communication channels and processes within the upper echelon of power provided him with the opportunity to determine the interaction process. Brzezinski's issue selling capacity grew as he increasingly assumed greater control over the interpretation of interagency meetings and denied alternative perspectives from reaching the President. Consequently, the Secretary of State was gradually side-tracked as the principal figure of foreign policy-making after the President. This trend was reinforced by Brown's gradual shift in policy perspectives during the course of the Carter Presidency and which contributed to a change in the power structure in the foreign policy team. As Brown increasingly assumed a more assertive US stance on international issues he strengthened the APNSA's position and the issues he promoted. After Vance resigned, Brzezinski gained even more power in the decision-making process. Consequently, Brzezinski became a "first among equals" in Carter's inner circle of foreign policy advisors (Glad, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

Over the years, many studies in the field of political science have focused on how strategic international policy issues have been sold. In recent years several studies have focused on the selling of the war in Iraq in the aftermath of September 11



(e.g., Birkland, 2008; Masters & Alexander, 2008; Western, 2005). However, most accounts tend to focus on how the issues are sold to the general public in an attempt to legitimize certain actions, for instance military intervention. By and large, the majority of these studies tend to deal more directly with agenda setting. As Weiss has clarified issue selling is concerned with the way individuals understand particular circumstances, whereas agenda setting “refers to the process by which some problems come to public attention at given times and places” (Weiss, 1989: 118).

Few studies have applied an issue selling framework to foreign policy-making. How issues are brought to the attention of top-level decision-makers and how this affects foreign policy has eluded a satisfactory account. Dutton and Ashford’s conceptual framework provides a sound and reliable outline to guide further research in foreign policy analysis. Moreover, the framework emphasizes the central role of communication in the political process. As the current study demonstrates, many of the strategies identified in the original framework were adopted by the APNSA and his staff. However, as recent research in the field of organizational change has demonstrated there are many other dynamics involved in issue selling which can help improve and strengthen the original framework.

The current research also seeks to contribute to consolidating the issue selling framework, particularly in the context of political leadership. It identifies and highlights some dynamics which the original framework did not adequately emphasize. For instance, the research highlights the emergent nature of foreign policy change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2009; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Brzezinski’s continuous issue selling endeavors attest to the ongoing and improvising enterprise which produces observable and prominent transformations in groups and organizations’ actions and behaviors through adjustments, adaptations, and revisions of their existing problem representations and policy practices.

Furthermore, the current study reveals the importance of the processual strategies in successfully selling an issue to political leadership. More than any other factor, it was Brzezinski’s capability to manage the communication process which allowed him to effectively sell the arc of crisis to the President and his closest advisors. More precisely, the APNSA and his NSC staff were able to interpret and define the problems facing the Administration and, consequently, guide the policy options selected by the decision-makers.

This raises many important issues considering that organizations are networks of communication with numerous sequential interactions acting simultaneously and which are all contributing to the construction of its reality (Ford, 1999). A leadership’s ability to harness these networks of communication is essential to guaranteeing that it is getting all the necessary information needed to inform

the decision-making process or, on the contrary, to clear any resistances or manipulations of the communication process. The relevance of understanding such processes increases as the international environment grows in complexity and uncertainty.

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